Interview with Ben Okri*

Rosemary Gray

Introduction

First, let me express my deep gratitude to you for taking time out of your busy schedule and the public demands made upon so celebrated a writer to talk to a reader who finds your works – be they poetic, dramatic, or prose – intriguing and compelling. I can well understand why the International Pen Club has you as their vice-president. Secondly, I must tell you that I would like to use this interview as the opening piece in a monograph of your works that I hope to publish shortly, containing articles by myself and also those by some of my postgraduate students at the University of Pretoria in South Africa.

Rosemary Gray: I'd like to begin by asking you to respond to my perception that throughout your oeuvre there seems to me to be a single guiding principle, a deeply embedded philosophical credo, if you like. Of course I could be mistaken, being driven in my reading of your work by my own horizons of expectation (to borrow a term from Robert Jauss). In other words, I may be being misled by my own reception aesthetics. The principle I refer to is, I believe, nowhere better expressed than towards the end of *Songs of Enchantment* when, from the silence of "unblindedness", Azaro's father, in conversation with his son, a "spiritchild", an *abiku*, is moved to muse that

> [t]he light comes out of the darkness.
>
> (1993: 287)

This is a catalyst for two other questions and for a request I should like to make, but perhaps you'd like to respond to my contention about your guiding principle before I pose the two questions that arise out of this one. Am I on the right track in attributing an innate optimism to you?

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Ben Okri: No, I wouldn't call it optimism so much as realism. But, it is important how one defines realism. Realism takes in what is seen, felt, touched; what is unknown and unseen. The primordial African spirit views reality from a wider spectrum [than the Western one]. It is informed by the metaphysical sense embedded in all the great traditions, but particularly in the African tradition. The African world view takes in the hierarchy of metaphysical beings which, in turn, leads to a number of essential questions: What constitutes one's reality? Is one's reality true only for that individual? Isn't our reality limited to what we are taught to see?

A piano with only five keys is a reality. But, if we include all the keys, the white keys and the black keys, this is a different reality. So reality depends on our cultural perception of the keyboard of life. Using the full keyboard, Azaro's father discovered a new perception of fundamental questions, especially the question of what constitutes the nature of reality. Is it outside oneself or fatally linked to human sensibilities? How does one construct reality? One cannot truthfully tell an African tale according to Jane Austen's reality or an early-nineteenth-century English tale according to an African reality. Dialogue with the West is thus difficult because reality is not universal.

R.G.: Is there an element of the Platonic notion of the "real" and the "really real" here?

B.O.: Yes, but also the Scandinavian concept of reality. I can draw it for you. [This Okri did in my copy of *Starbook.*]

R.G.: Although the author has himself emphasised the realistic dimensions of his work, this realism must be seen to embrace the ancestors, myths and legends, which are an integral part of the real world, of urban life and of rural life. Local beliefs are thus part of the real world, not parallel with, but contiguous to it. Elsewhere, I have referred to Okri's spirit-in-life beings as leading sentient double lives (see *The English Academy Review* 26(1) May 2009: 45). In *Starbook*, Okri states: "Only in light can truth be found .... Beyond is where it really begins" (2007: 118), which is itself an effective synopsis of what he writes in *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 12-13):

The greatest inspiration, the most sublime ideas of living that have come down to humanity come from a higher realm, a happier realm, a place of pure dreams, a heaven of blessed notions. Ideas and infinite possibilities dwell in absolute tranquillity.

Before these ideas came to us they were pure, they were silent, and their life-giving possibilities were splendid. But when they come to our earthly realm they acquire weight and words. They become less.

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R.G.: The bond between father and son is so tragically wanting in Achebe's seminal African text – *Things Fall Apart.* In your novels, especially in the *Famished Road* trilogy, this relationship is robust. I am wondering if this Telemachian aspect speaks of a healed or healing lineage in the postcolonial consciousness. Would you care to comment?

B.O.: That is a very difficult question. The reflection of the father-son relationship is a mirror of the degree or presence of freedom in society. It reflects the extent to which the parental relationship, whether this be that of the child(ren) to the father or to the mother, mirrors society. This becomes a microcosm of the strategies for self-definition and emotional sensitivity. In a brutalised society, the father-son relationship is naturally distorted.

R.G.: Yes, of course. Maya Angelou deals extensively with this aspect in her novels, doesn't she – especially in *I know why the caged bird sings*? Damaged souls lead to a cyclic pattern of disaster.

B.O.: Yes, the family is the intimate theatre of society. Novelists have sensed that this micro-theatre reflects the larger societal tensions. *The Famished Road* shows the extent to which a transition has taken place; so the relationship unfolds according to our own microcosm.

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R.G.: Also arising from my personal reception aesthetics is the question of an interrelationship between what the *abiku* child perceives as the wisdom emanating from the silence of his dad's regaining of his sight, his "unblindedness", and an Akashic still point. Is there a symbiosis between these two moments of enlightenment? Does such enlightenment spring from what Jung has termed the collective unconscious, or what Taoism calls the Akashic record, or am I yoking two disparate notions together by violence (to borrow loosely from Alexander Pope)?

B.O.: A thread runs through all cultures. Every now and then for individuals, whether caught in tragic revelation or great suffering, all traditions lead to experience outside common perception into some higher space. In Scandinavian sagas, for example, whatever it is, it is going on outside the dome. All the traditions have this, but it is the breaking out that is the grandeur of tragedy.

R.G.: Its cathartic potential?

B.O.: Quite! Suffering leads to enlightenment, and they both interconnect. We are defined by the depth in the hermeneutic.

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R.G.: Staying with political issues, a prevalent argument (supported by historical evidence) holds that white colonial thieves stole African land by force; then imposed both Western civilisation and the Christian religion upon the peoples. Works by several black Africans (Achebe, Armah, Emechetta, Ngugi, Marachera et al.) understandably write back to the imperial centre. Your works and those of Wole Soyinka, in contradistinction, seem to go a step further in pushing aside any attempts to colonise either the mind or the heart of Africa. Would you like to comment on this "newer" creative approach?

B.O.: The poetic axis is there. To chew over the imperial or the colonial is not what I feel or what Soyinka thinks. I sense that it is well dealt with by others. Too much of it would allow it to define the narrative, but there is a need to show aspects of the continuum. We are not defined by history. The human spirit is limitless and our job as writers is to unveil. It's not just the pistol shots! Of course, colonising the mind is implied as a sort of backdrop, but this does not define the text. Soyinka and I are not side-stepping the issue. We have taken the punch and then carried on.

There is a profound responsibility of writer and readers: what you produce and what you examine eventually becomes defining. There have only been a hundred or so years of oppression in the life history of humankind. The redemption of the human spirit occurs when we throw light on the depredation of history.

R.G.: Yes, some critics seem to have misread Alex la Guma's *A Stone Country* as a simple indictment of apartheid rather than a depredation of history's defining role. It's a tour de force of the way on (see R.A. Gray, 1999. The Music under the Stone: A Reading of Alex la Guma's *The Stone Country*: *English at the Turn of the Millennium.* Ed. Andrew Foley, pp. 87-93).

B.O.: I haven't read that, but I should like to do so.

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R.G.: In an extension of the previous question, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* seem to be three pillars of the stage on which the revelation of imperial/colonial savagery is based. Your work, however, appears to fly above these concerns while, at the same time, being predicated upon such truths. To what extent is this part of a conscious artistic strategy?

B.O.: The music of an artistic tradition! Our ancestors cut a path and we cut further paths, building on their foundations. It is as if one receives the baton and carries on. The process is both cyclical and vertical. I have felt the need to take the baton and to carry on. It's a question of standing on these writers' shoulders, just as they have stood on the shoulders of earlier writers. The duty of the artist is to extend the boundaries.

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R.G.: In his acceptance speech (7 December 2010: 11), Mario Vargas Llosa points to the inherent paradox of storytelling. This most recent recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature asserts that

> [l]iterature is a false representation of life that nevertheless helps us to understand life better, to orient ourselves in the labyrinth where we were born, pass by, and die. It compensates for the reverses and frustrations real life inflicts on us, and because of it we can decipher, at least partially, the hieroglyphic that existence tends to be for the great majority of human beings, principally those of us who generate more doubts than certainties and confess our perplexity before subjects like transcendence, individual and collective destiny, the soul, the sense or senselessness of history, the to and fro of rational knowledge.

Would you please respond to this view of fiction-making?

B.O.: I don't know about "false". Perhaps the word was lost in translation from the Spanish. It is not false; it is not a lie. There is a paradox. It is both. Art is a lie that tells the truth. Life is imponderable so one cannot tell the whole truth. A reproduction on a stage, for instance, at once demarcates a new dimension. Literature is an abstract and it is a guise. We bring it into being by our being, our infinite permutation. This is the magic of literature. How you perceived this magical transformation is central to writing. Literature creates a parallel mirror, a parallel reality. We only see things through reflection. We perceive by translation, by reflection. Literature is one further step in this translation. What we trust is the aggregate of science [knowledge]. It is a triple transaction.

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R.G.: In the now famous documentary on the Congo, entitled *Leopold's Ghost*, young Congolese children have their hands amputated for not collecting full buckets of latex. Likewise in Zimbabwe, unspeakable horrors are committed in the Vumba mountains near Mutari by Korean trained askaris to "protect" the gold from the local inhabitants. The rapacious materialism of the neocolonialist mind is glancingly dismissed in your

works, with the possible exception of its treatment in the demise of Madam Koto in your earlier novels and, then, in the stories in *Tales of Freedom* (2009). Do you perhaps think that the emotional and imaginative indigence of the "Western" and neocolonial mind has deepened irretrievably, or is there a way out, a way on?

B.O.: It comes back to metaphysics; to epistemology, to the theogony of reading.

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R.G.: Your writing celebrates the mythic and spiritual dimensions of the eternal African soul. Is this a reflection of an abiding interest in Taoist philosophy or is this attributable to your own Urhobo/Igbo consciousness or perhaps to Perennial theology or to what Mircea Eliade calls "the myth of eternal return"? To what extent am I correct in the supposition that what you propound in your non-fictional writings and, essentially, in the novels *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) and *Starbook* (2007) is a freeing of the fetters of the past and a visualisation of universal justice "through careful spiritual and social evolution" (*Astonishing the Gods* [1995] 1999: 72)? Is the frame of reference eclectic?

B.O.: I am very cross-cultural. This is not eclecticism. I am fascinated by similar threads that run throughout philosophy that appear to come from the primordial tradition. For example, visits to the underworld and trickster gods occur in literature from very many parts of the world.

This is not because human nature is similar; it is more profound. These threads running through so many cultures give me a sense not of diversity, but of one source, a unity. Myths tell parallel stories. They enrich one another and the future of the race depends on paying more attention to these streams that fascinate me and enrich the quality of life.

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R.G.: In one of your books, you use the unusual word "pullulating" twice. It struck me that this heavily onomatopoeic word speaks for an insistence on liberty and a unique urgency not only to live, but also to dream. To what extent is this so?

R.G.: The word occurs in *Starbook* (2007: 336). Having reread *Starbook* just prior to this interview and conscious of time constraints, I decided against posing this question, for in this novel Okri provides the clearest of answers to the injunction to dream, which I quote in full:

> The prince sat under the tree, rested on its trunk, and was borne off to sleep. But it was not a normal sleep, nor was it a long one. And during that sleep many things happened to him that he would only remember in fragments of dreams over the many years of the suffering to come. He dreamt the beginning of all things, and their end. He dreamt all the stories of humanity. He dreamt of the answer to the greatest question, told him by a being in space unlimited inside a kingdom of silence. All that he was, all that he would be; and the solution to death; the answer of immortality; he dreamt them all in a brief moment of sleep. Then he awoke refreshed and found himself in a different place. The tree was in flower. The birds had awoken and were singing. Nine maidens in white drifted past him smiling. The forest was gone. The gap he sought stood before him like a ring of enchanted fire. He stepped into the fire and found himself on the other side, near the river of his village.

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R.G.: The contest of the individual to gain and enjoy integrity is celebrated in a kaleidoscope of spiritual colours and forms in your work. At its first level, this contest seems to be the struggle to rise above the shadow of the governors general that tried to cow the bodies and minds of so many Africans. Higher up, this fight or flight for inner illumination takes us to a universal level of existential truth. How far would you agree with this estimation?

B.O.: In many ways, this is a misperception. One work cannot define my work. I have journeyed through the reality of life in my early novels to a spiritual dimension. So this does not reflect the full dimension of my work. I would prefer to say that I fly with, not above. Life is a crucible. My quest is to attempt to touch all points: man in love, man in crisis, woman in society, suffering, becoming, freedom, and so on. Sometimes I try to use the whole keyboard and to touch all in one novel. It is necessary to point to another aspect, to adopt a circular approach.

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R.G.: I have argued that your project is how to turn spiritual exhaustion into spiritual energy; how to distil human experience, how to "domesticate infinity" (to use your own words from *Mental Fight*) (see Rosemary Gray, 2007. "Domesticating infinity" in Ben Okri's *Mental Fight* and *Astonishing the Gods: The English Academy Review* 24(1) May 2007, pp. 85-101.) The guiding spirit seems to be a universalist one in that you at once conflate the intellectual currents of German philosophy (with its will to transgress the boundary between the human and the divine) with the Judeo-Christian tendency to confront almost without mediation the problems of the

absolute and its promises, and to move beyond this to a return to Arcadia, to a Blakean song of innocence. Please comment on this view?

B.O.: African literature has a preponderance of the historical and the social because of its history. But it is also necessary to draw attention to Divine Comedy. There should always be a hint of an attempt to tease out all dimensions. Writers must remind people of this – must enrich the interpretation of the hieroglyphics.

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R.G.: Many of your novels track self-development in the path of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, but straightaway one pulls back from that conclusion to consider whether you have not brought into being a unique genre of the novel – the *enlightenment novel.* Developing or becoming is not enough. "To be", we need light from within. We need, like your Azaro's dad and the classical Tiresius, to be blind in order to see! To what extent would you agree or disagree with this estimation, this attempt to pinpoint an emergent genre?

B.O.: Yes, I accept the term. It's interesting. *Astonishing the Gods* and *Starbook* are essentially books that aim at the enlightenment of the human spirit. The conclusion to all novels must come full cycle. It has been done in poetry – to ask questions in a non-religious sense – about the evolution of the human spirit: Is there something in all the myths? Is something going on? Myths and philosophy need to be part of the novel – not in a stream-of-consciousness sense but marrying the synchronic and the circular.

R.G.: As well as the diachronic?

B.O.: Yes, it has to do with ways of seeing. [There followed a short discussion on John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* which both interviewer and interviewee had read and enjoyed.] Is it possible that the human spirit can take a leap, become enriched? What will the implications for this be for the novel? If we strive for some transcendence would we not be better writers, better teachers?

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R.G.: Talking of ways of seeing brings me to my last question. The Peruvian laureate (2010: 11), mentioned earlier, asserts that

> fiction is more than entertainment, more than an intellectual exercise that sharpens one's sensibility and awakens a critical spirit. It is an absolute necessity so that civilization continues to exist, renewing and preserving in us the best of what is human. So we do not retreat into the savagery of isolation and life is not reduced to the pragmatism of specialists who see things profoundly but ignore what surrounds, precedes, and continues those things.

In fact, singing the praises of writing, in general, and of fiction, in particular, Llosa (2010: 11) goes so far as to attribute the transition from barbarism to civilisation to storytellers:

> From the time they began to dream collectively, to share their dreams, instigated by storytellers, they ceased to be tied to the treadmill of survival, a vortex of brutalizing tasks, and their life became dream, pleasure, fantasy, and a revolutionary plan: to break out of confinement and change and improve, a struggle to appease the desires and ambitions and that stirred imagined lives in them, and the curiosity to clear away the mysteries that filled their surroundings.

I have quoted Llosa at some length because in your own *A Way of Being Free* (1997), you also credit creative artists with this same civilising capability, asserting that

> poets seem to be set against the world because we need them to show us the falseness of our limitation, the true extent of our kingdom.

The poet turns the earth into mother, the sky becomes a shelter, the sun an inscrutable god, and the pragmatists are irritated .... The problem is with those who are frightened of the rather limitless validity of the imagination, frightened of people who continually extend the boundaries of the possible, people who ceaselessly reinvent existence; frontiers people of the unknown and the uncharted.

Please respond.

B.O.: Literature at its best leads to civilisation. The novel should not just be a potboiler. Reading is an act of making [in the Medieval sense of creating], not of the writer but of the reader. Making is visualisation, prevision – then civilisation becomes unstoppable.

We either return to blindness or make a leap to a now. There are only two options: retreat to the cave or leap. This is primal. We have inherited from the ancestors. This must take us forward not back!

Literature and civilisation are different but not different. The society that gave rise to the Divine Comedy flowered as a renaissance; the society that gave rise to Shakespeare led to a greater civilisation. Literature does not create it, but there is an inspirational link like mercury and the alchemist's

stone. Literature shows the presence and reveals and enhances a psychic strength, pulls it out to reflect a greater civilisation.

R.G.: Okri argued in *The Guardian* (January 2003) that the decline of nations begins with the decline of its writers, "[b]ecause writers represent the unconscious vigour and fighting spirit of a land. Writers are the very sign of the psychic health of a people: they are the barometer of the vitality of the spirit of the nation".

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R.G.: Thank you for your time, Ben. I am blown away by your generosity of spirit and cannot thank you enough for giving me such quality time with you.

R.G.: For this interview, I deliberately kept my questions general, if somewhat philosophical in the hopes that it will inspire others to join the voyage of discovery into Okri's oeuvre. Apprised of the authorial comment in *Starbook* (2007: 98), quoted below, I did not pose direct questions about the interpretation of specific works, for unravelling meaning is the task and the joy of the critic.

> The greatest masters say nothing about their works because there is nothing to say, save that it was done, it was seen, it was unseen, it was rendered, it was remembered, carried across, brought here, imperfectly. The less one makes, the more is made.

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Early in our meeting, I asked Ben Okri if he would be interested in coming to South Africa either as a writer-in-residence at the University of Pretoria or for a mini discussion tour of some of our tertiary institutions. His response was tentative but positive and naturally would depend on my negotiations and fund raising capabilities on my return to South Africa.

* Marsh Agency, 50 Albermarle Street, London, Wednesday, 16 February 2011 at 14:00

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